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Up-Helly-Aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland

Callum G. Brown

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Up-Helly-AA is Europe’s largest and most spectacular winter fire festival. In the biting Arctic wind on the last Tuesday of every January, a "Guizer Jarl" leads one thousand men in guising costumes with flaming torches through the streets of Lerwick, the capital of the Shetland Isles, accompanying a Viking galley to its ceremonial burning. This is the first full study of the historical origins and contemporary significance of Up-Helly-AA. It traces the formation of Yule celebrations in the 1840s into the civic ritual constructed in the 1880s and 1890s by Shetland nationalists, folk revivalists, labour activists, teetotallers and municipal authorities. In the twentieth century, the renamed "Up-Helly-AA" became the principal community event in the Shetlands, making complex statements about gender, class, "nation," rebelliousness and respectability.

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